



*Pablo Picasso, 1908: "Three Women"*

## Ascent from Abstract to Concrete

There is no *a priori* humanity, or presupposition of humanity. There may be a God, or not. What is human is not given, but it is made, by humans. We are made as humans by the knowledge that we continue to get, through labour, and to share, socially.

The knowledge that humanity has accumulated, altogether, is science. Objective things-in-themselves that are parts of the universe become known through labour and are thereby brought into that sphere which is humanity. So, **the Object becomes part of the Subject**.

Similarly, thoughts and decisions become facts of a social and political kind and become objects of science, including Scientific Socialism. In this way, **Subject becomes Object**.

These reversals, inversions (or “reciprocal actions” as Clausewitz might have called them), are critical transformations and are noticed and incorporated into the philosophy of Hegel and of Karl Marx.

We cannot say that everything is thought, and we equally cannot say that everything is matter; and to say that reality is an unqualified mixture of thought and matter is only to enter a hall of mirrors.

Hegel creates an escape from this maze into a better, and dynamic, form of understanding.

Hegel’s solution is to demonstrate how the movement takes place, not once and for all, but constantly. In the previous part of this course, Andy Blunden’s lecture explained it like this:

*“The categories of Being which come into being and pass away, continue to come and go indefinitely. The succession of oppositions which overtake one another in Essence*

*continue to generate polar opposite pairs of determinations. As these unfold, a new form of social practice develops self-consciousness, with a succession of new qualities, new entities, new relations, both incidental and necessary, registered in thoughts and purposive activity and representations, and judged, and people may draw from these experiences a more concrete understanding of the new social practice as it develops. So in terms of time, all these relations are happening at the same time, although there is a logical dependence of the later categories on the former.”*

This movement is an **ascent from the abstract to the concrete**.

What is “concrete”? It is the unity and interaction of the parts of a system. It is a dialectical unity-and-struggle-of-opposites. In philosophy, “concrete” has nothing to do with being fixed, hard or permanent. In philosophy this word has a special meaning.

Our main document in this part is “[Hegel’s Conception of the Concrete](#)” from Chapter 2 of Evald Ilyenkov’s “[Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital](#)”. Ilyenkov (1924-1979) was a first-class Soviet philosopher. The full [Ilyenkov Archive on MIA is here](#). Here are a couple of quotes from Ilyenkov:

*“As we know, Hegel was the first to understand the development of knowledge as a historical process subject to laws that do not depend on men’s will and consciousness. He discovered the law of ascent from the*

*abstract to the concrete as the law governing the entire course of development of knowledge.”*

*“In reality, the immediate basis of the development of thought is not nature as such but precisely the transformation of nature by social man, that is, practice.”*

**Picture:** Pablo Picasso’s “Three Women”. “Cubism” in visual art was a conscious attempt to represent the relationship of the abstract and the concrete on a two-dimensional surface.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Hegel’s Conception of the Concrete, Evald Ilyenkov, 1960](#).
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